

## The Duxbury Fire Dept.

(The Human Side of Fire Fighting)

This is the last of 3 articles on the history of the Duxbury Fire Department

by The Rev. Canon Robert Merry

As I wheeled into the fire house parking lot on Tremont St. the brush fire wagon whizzed past me and with screeching tires whirled around the lot on its way up the street to answer a call. The inter-com was sounding as I walked into the station and I heard it was a grass fire near LaGreca's store on Summer St. As I spoke to the dispatcher I learned the chief was chairing a "Heads of Departments" meeting in the Old Town Hall and would be back in an hour or so. The words were hardly out of her mouth when I saw through the office window the chief's car racing up Tremont St., dome light flashing and siren blaring on his way to the fire. Meanwhile on the spot reports were cracking on the radio at the fire scene and in a moment the chief's voice reported that the fire was under control and he would return to his meeting. The entire operation from the receipt of the call until everyone was back in place could not have been more than 25 minutes. It was a brilliant display of our new Duxbury Fire Department. No one could have staged a better drama of modern fire-fighting techniques.

It is trite to say that it was not always so. Seventy-five years ago in the early days of the department the best that could have been done was to reach the scene of the fire half an hour after it had been started, often only to observe its disastrous consequences. And there was no community reserve supply of water to draw upon. In fact there was no fire department at all in the modern organizational sense until the combination of Frederick B. Knapp and Hortence E. Merry began to function. There was only a random regional arrangement of firewards each stocked with a fire barrel, shovels, axes, and in 2 instances hand tubs. It would be difficult to target a single incident as the exact beginning of the Duxbury Fire Department, but a dramatic moment in the career of Hortence Merry may serve. He tells about it in his final report to the Department on the occasion of his retirement. Here it is in his own words:



House built by Mr. H.E. Merry in 1902 on Washington St. As the family increased 4 rooms were added. Mr. Merry had a retail meat business for many years. The meat market was in the basement of this house. The old windmill provided water. The windmill, which was on top of the barn, is where Mr. Merry almost lost his life one night when the windmill broke loose.

"I was peddling meat one morning when fire broke out. I took my horse out of the butcher cart and hitched him to the handtub and went to the fire which was on West St. There was a man in the burning house, overcome and helpless, and we got him out, but the building was a complete loss. Sadly I returned the handtub to its quarters and proceeded on my meat route.

"A few days later the board of selectmen and fire engineers called me into their office and asked me if I would organize and train a group of 22 young men known as Number One Company. This request came to me subsequent to the appointment of 2 other men who had failed to take any action whatsoever.

"One night a fire broke out in Capt. Alexander Wadsworth's house (this was on Washington St. near Surplus). Captain Wadsworth had sailed the Seven Seas and collected many treasures from foreign lands. Now he was dead and his widow was living alone, and the neighbors stood idly by and watched that beautiful home burn to the ground for not even a water bucket was available to fight that fire."

Town Meeting records show that the selectmen and board of fire engineers were responding to a popular mandate evidenced at this meeting in 1905 as the town was in a quiet rage over the loss of this beautiful home. Dorothy Wentworth, our Duxbury historian, believes that there were many other homes full of oriental treasures brought back from the China trade which were also lost, but there was something about this fire that roused the town's people as never before and they demanded action.

Hortence Merry whose nickname was "Hort" often contracted to "Hot" when his "direct action" policies took effect, lost no time in getting to work. He was quick to respond to the request for training young men as well as shaping up the fire-fighting equipment, and his experience under Sgt. Reardon at Fort Warren in preparation for the Spanish-American war stood him in good stead. He saw early in the day that any efficient fighting force against fire or any invading enemy must take on a semi-military aspect. So every week the lights burned late in the engine houses as men met to evaluate their evening fire drills. Boys in their teens were brought into the force, and women were invited to prepare meals for the more and more frequent suppers. A band of volunteer professionals, doctors, nurses, scientists, also joined the force. Patrons who could back up the force with material help also came into the company and soon the fire department was the dominant political and social influence in the Community. A band was formed, paid for by a "400 Club" and held concerts at Train Field on Holiday and other weekends. In 1938 at the Bourne Bridge dedication it was the Duxbury Firemen's Band that led the procession.

Duxbury's Fire Department became known throughout the Commonwealth, winning regularly at firemen's musters at country fairs, and taking part in any and all community affairs. A significant one that still carries on today is the 4th of July celebration. In the days just after World War I the eve of the 4th was a time for wild arson as roving bands of hoodlums set fires to old buildings, boats and lumber piles. The

department met and decided that something must be done to channel this illegal youthful exuberance, hence the parade and for a time gigantic bonfire and fireworks, extending after Duxbury's Tercentenary celebration in 1937 to several days known as "Duxbury Days." It is not just bravado that places the fire engines at the head of the procession, it is historic justice.

Since the early days the fire chief had been called chief engineer, and the forest warden was a separate office. Town reports of the period mention the rivalry between the 2 forces, but with the coming of Eben Briggs onto the force in 1943 the 2 were gradually combined into one of which he was appointed head. At this late date the fire department was still a largely volunteer organization with only one man drawing salary. Even the chief was paid only on an hourly basis as he put in part time. For many years this one paid full time man, was Richard Whitney, who functioned out of station No.2 at Hall's Corner. Eben brought new enthusiasm to the force, and made a creditable record of keeping down the cost of fire destruction. During his time the kinds and types of fires shifted from house fires to chimney fires, bridge fires and auto fires. At about this time too, emergency calls began to multiply for auto accidents, drownings and home and job accidents. Eben's response to these new demands on the force and his differences with his predecessor are implied in one town report that includes full reports both from him and chief Merry!

When George Butler took over as fire chief on Eben Briggs' retirement in 1960 the emphasis of the department had already shifted to half and half fire and emergency tasks. This necessitated 24-hour surveillance and began the present professionally trained force. It is remarkable in passing that the entire budget for the Fire Dept. excluding the cost of equipment was \$6,500 in 1942 -- about this time the town was spending upwards of \$9,000 for snow and ice removal. Under Mike's leadership the ambulance was purchased, other emergency equipment was provided often by generous town citizens and a brief glance at the Fire Log in the Duxbury Clipper each week will show that most of the calls received by the dispatcher are only remotely related to fire.

So as Duxbury grew from a village of 5,000 to a commuting community of more than 13,000 essential changes in the make-up and operation of the fire department were instituted. The vast army of volunteers, and auxiliaries was no longer needed or available. The automobile was no longer a novelty, and beach picnickers and swimmers were routed around the residential areas to the then rural and forested sections of town. But the need for the department was still evident despite the new welcome state ban on open fires. As the numbers of people involved in its work diminished the demands for skill and sophistication increased. Now training was demanded not just to toss a 100 lb. roll of fire hose and hitch it to a hydrant but to revive a victim of smoke inhalation, or drowning, or extricate a survivor from an auto wreck without puncturing a lung with a broken rib. Now professionally trained men replaced the zealous but often unskilled volunteers, and assuaged the fears of double damage, by fire and then the water and chemicals to check its power.

When Chief Howard Blanchard came on the scene in 1971 the stage was set for a final consolidation and updating of equipment and streamlining chain of command. He brought to the department a dedication born of the experience of "coming up through the ranks" and a passion that things be done right and with as little fuss and fanfare as possible.

His first connection with the department was a sub-teen lad attending the Bourne Bridge dedication in 1938 when the Duxbury Firemen's Band led the Governor's procession. A little later he earned spending money hauling water for the "Burning Crews"

Chief Merry had organized and Old Colony Railroad had paid for rather than foot the bill for fire damages later from steam locomotive cinders. His immediate task was to draw 3 fire companies into one, operating out of 2 stations, a major one on Tremont St. and a smaller one in Ashdod.

"You see," he said in an hour long interview he gave me, "fire fighting is a good deal like a religious call, like your own call. It is in your blood. Men so called would rather fight fire than eat if called on in emergency; they would rather do this than anything else even though the pay is less and the risk greater."

I asked him to describe for me exactly what kind of fire fighting force he has now. "We have no volunteers any more," he said. "They just aren't there now. And in the last months before we shifted to our present force employers were complaining to me about work stoppages and consequent loss of income through the earlier system. We have now 3 full-time paid men on duty at each of the 2 stations, and these men take care of 70% of the calls. Then we have a back-up force of 22 "call men," who are also trained and skilled in fire fighting techniques. They have had to go to school like everybody else. And these men are committed to drop everything wherever they are and join us in any situation where we feel we need their help. Actually this occurs only a few times a year. We do have about 1500 calls a year, and this year this should run to 2,000. Compare this with the 250 calls we used to have in the fifties."

I came away from this interview convinced that our department today is ready to cope with any emergency they are called upon to face, and Duxbury is blessed with a committed force equal to any in its history. I could not help contrasting its response to that grass fire the morning I came into the station to do this research with what I saw happen as we rushed Old Bess to the old handtub at number one and tried to get her hitched up. Problem was she was too impatient to wait for hitching but wanted to get to the fire at once. It is something to think about, that the time it took for the entire response to that grass fire and the return to the station was less than it took to fasten Old Bess to the fire wagon. In that short span of time the firemen on duty had been dispatched, the chief had been called although he was at a meeting a mile away, all the regional fire companies had been alerted so they could respond if needed, and the fire had been contained -- all in 25 minutes. My father would have been speechless at this preformance, for he loved the department as he loved the town. You could say it was his religion, this and the Republican party. He never went to church except on special occasions; he just could not sit through a sermon, but as I laid his body to rest alongside that of his wife who had died many years before, I felt he had made a lasting contribution to the town and hence mankind in the establishment of this fire department. And it was with real appreciation that as I began the committal prayers that day a platoon of firemen in full uniform, and marching in step approached the grave site. I did not count the men, but there were close to the original number that Selectmen Edmund Sears and Wendell Phillips had asked him to organize into a fighting force and train to deal with the scourage of fire in this community in 1905.